

# bleeding in the house of god

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John "Soap" MacTavish, Simon "Ghost" Riley

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# bleeding in the house of god

by [revolvermonkcelot](#)

## Summary

[Cheap liquor sluicing over ragged flesh, fragments of embedded dirt. Mingling with blood like something holy. Soap sucks in a breath; the sting is bright, glassy. Bearable, after everything. A residual burning gnawing at the margins of the wound. Droplets patter onto the church floor, loud in the silence. Blood pooling on terracotta. Someone will find this in the morning, and they will wonder what transpired here, in this sacred place. Or maybe they won't. No miracle to be observed here. Only two stupid gringos bleeding in the house of God.]

after Las Almas, Soap and Ghost regroup.

## Notes

i don't go here at all besides Silvi's fic recs, Val's art and a handful of gameplay videos, so a thousand apologies for every detail I got wrong here, except for Ghost having dark eyes, because it's Silvi's birthday and she can have whatever she wants. Happy birthday queen, love you <3

Val's incredible art for this fic can be found on [twitter](#) and [tumblr](#), please go and admire it with tears in your eyes, as I did

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

They ditch the truck an hour out of Las Almas. The long way round; remote mountain roads, headlights dimmed, for whatever the fuck that's worth, because theirs is the only vehicle out here, and Ghost drives like it's rush hour on the fucking M25 and he's got a dying grandmother to visit. And 'road' is a grandiose term for these meandering paths cut into the arid hillside; vertiginous drop through stubborn clumps of huisache, spindly mesquite. Dust clouds like nuclear fallout. He's almost grateful when Ghost grinds the vehicle to a halt, commands him, in that gruff no-bullshit tone, to hop out.

*Shanks' pony for us from here on out*, Ghost says, squinting down into the valley; town lights fanning out like a river delta somewhere far below. *They'll clock the headlights from miles out if we go much higher.*

Soap eyes the vehicle doubtfully. *You're just gonna leave it here?*

Ghost fixes him with that bleak, inscrutable gaze. *Not gonna cause a traffic jam now, is it? Come on Johnny. Got a long old way to go.*

It's not so bad at first. The night air is cooler this far up, cleansed of the syrupy humidity of the city below, and his lungs ache with effort but it's a good ache, the kind that reminds him he's alive, still. Following the path, but knee-deep in the scrub, the better to dive for cover should a vehicle approach. He's a cautious man, Ghost. Soap figures it's what's kept him alive this long.

*Keep your eyes peeled*, Ghost says, indicating the swathes of scrubland with a nod.

*For what?*

He grunts. *These mountains are the Sierra de Lobos*, he says. He doesn't elaborate.

Soap nods. He can shoulder his rifle if he needs to. Just about. The wound is throbbing now. Ceaseless as migraine. Worse the longer he walks, and it's all fucking uphill, isn't it; Ghost marching relentlessly through the chaparral, loose scree underfoot, though he never loses his balance, surefooted as a cat, or possibly a goat. The latter thought provokes a snort of barely contained laughter, to which Ghost turns, slow and ominous, staring Soap down with those flat, dark eyes.

*Wanna share that thought with the class?*

Soap shakes his head. *I'll be a good boy, Lt.*

Ghost eyes him a moment longer. *Good*, he says, after a time. Resuming his grim march. Up towards the stars, it seems. The peak hadn't seemed quite so distant when they'd been driving up in the truck. Perspective's a funny thing, Soap thinks, wiping sweat from his forehead with grimy knuckles, though it's chilly up here, air thin and razorsharp. Headlights are a hazard, but the sound of dry branches crackling beneath Ghost's bovver boots like the snap-crackle of small bones is a negligible signal; the whisper of foliage against their clothes. His own breath, harsh in his ears. Sounds of nature, aren't they? Just animals. Like the crickets whirring in the dry grass. Deer in the matorral, skittish and aloof.

He marches in time to the erratic hammer of his pulse. Blood hissing in his ears. It sounds faintly like there's an ocean on the other side of the mountain, lapping with rough tongue at the dry and crumbling earth. The sick throb of his shoulder, keeping time with his heart. They move through the starlit dark like wolves. Sierra de Lobos. Black-clad spectres spiriting through some poor mestizo farmer's backyard. Shadows running from Shadows. His mouth twists with wry irony.

This time, when Ghost turns, he stops in his tracks.

*You ain't right*, he says, matter of fact.

*Fuck d'you mean?* Catching his breath. Harder than it was before. His lungs feel thick, woolly; his head swims with effort. All that fucking hiking in the Cairngorms and he's near-KO'd by a hill in the arse end of Mexico. *I'm fine.*

*You keep muttering to yourself.*

Soap blinks. *I keep...?*

*You're shivering. You cold?*

*We're in the mountains. Course I'm fucking cold.*

Ghost eyes him doubtfully. *Don't go getting all delirious on me*, he says. Pushing on through the scrub, a little slower, now. *I'm not carrying you up the bloody mountain.*

*Don't need you to-* and his legs choose this exact instant to give way. Like they've been knocked out from beneath him. He remembers, for a

split second, lying in his own blood in a backstreet in Las Almas. Drifting in and out of the grey. And Ghost in his ear, like a call to prayer: [Johnny. Johnny, how copy...?]

( *Thought we'd lost you, he'd said*)

He slips in the scree, slides a few metres down the hillside. Ghost is on him in an instant. Catches him before he can tumble arse over tit; propped momentarily against him, dizzy and pathetic, and Ghost lets out an exasperated hiss, glares at him with bonewhite irises, stark black eyes.

*Fuck's sake, Johnny.*

*Just lost my balance*, Soap protests, but Ghost is dragging him upright, pulling his good arm over the broad plain of his shoulders. Like a sack of fucking potatoes. He might as well be, for all the trouble Ghost has lifting him.

*You're burning up*, Ghost mutters. *S'pose that's what you get for going swimming with a bullet wound.*

Whose fault is that, he wants to say, but the words get stuck on his tongue, thick and gelatinous. His shoulder throbs insistently. His ego hurts more. *I can walk*, he manages to spit out, but Ghost just grunts, irritable. Hefts him unceremoniously up the hill. Feet grazing the ground with each step. Soap isn't convinced he can bear his own weight right now, but Ghost could at least let him take a bash at it.

*Quicker this way*, Ghost insists. Stubborn cunt, him. Makes Soap look halfway reasonable. He lets Ghost half-drag him up the hillside, approximating footsteps where his toes scrape the chaparral. A swaying, dizzy ascent; stars swirl like stop-motion, staggering in the space between blinks.

Ghost's hands slip in the sweat pooling in the small of his back, dappling his exposed arms. He recognises the heat simmering off Ghost his own, radiating back off the other man like whitewash in the afternoon sun, though he feels chilled to the wire, leaning unconsciously into Ghost's body in pursuit of warmth. He thinks Ghost is talking to him, but he can't seem to focus on the words. On the shape of them, muffled by inches of black fabric. Might as well be

cicadas burbling merrily somewhere in the distance. Do they even sing at night? He doesn't fucking know. They don't have cicadas in Craigend. Rats the size of Yorkshire terriers, though. It's this last, ignominious thought which follows him down into the murky water, where he drifts, for a time. Unmoored and at peace.

#

The crackle of static pulls him sharply back into the world.

*Status report. How copy?*

He snaps awake. Disoriented. His arm pulses like a rotting tooth. He remembers Las Almas. Mothers begging in frantic Spanish. Rain in torchlight.

*Copy*, he says, vague. Blinking in the low light. Images taking slow focus. No street underfoot. The sweet-dusty scent of dry grass, cracked earth. Electrical wires silhouetted against the bluedark sky, crisscrossed, like spiderwebs. He realises he's upright. Arm pulled taut around someone's shoulder.

*Napping on the job*, Ghost says, dry. *What'll Price say when I tell him.*

*Ah, bolt ya rocket.*

Ghost huffs, a near-laugh. *Think you can walk?*

He lifts his head. The earth doesn't spin. It seems like a good omen. *Aye*, he says, with a confidence he doesn't entirely feel. *Put us down.*

Ghost does. Lowering him gingerly to the ground, a slow release; sliding his arm from the broad stack of his shoulders. Soap's knees buckle as his feet hit the ground. He fights the impulse to collapse in a boneless heap. Succeeds, by sheer force of will. *Was I out long?*

*Few minutes.*

*Sorry.*

Ghost shoots him a deadpan glare. *For getting shot? Fuck off, Johnny. Don't be daft.*

There's a building, Soap realises. They've reached some kind of plateau. Overlooking the valley, panoramic; the mountains rise into the near distance beyond, carving jagged shapes into the night sky. Beyond the building the hillside sweeps down into the dark, steep and abyssal, and there in the centre a tiny chapel. Yellow-painted stucco, scuffed and cheerful; a tiny redbrick belltower overlooking a grey-paved plaza. Broad-palmed clusters of prickly pear like sentinels in the dark. *What's a church doing up here?* he asks.

*Closer to god, innit.*

*That how it works, eh?* He squints. Dark, empty windows. Brick storehouse out back, ringed with wire fencing, rusty with age. Plastic chairs, overturned. The words *Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla* daubed in blue paint; elegant script, weatherworn and patchy. It feels a little like the edge of the world. *You think it's open?*

Ghost unsheathes his knife. *Will be in a sec.*

*You're not gonna break into a church, are you?*

He can't see it, but he knows Ghost is grinning under the mask. Something in the bright of his eyes, suddenly. It occurs to him, briefly, that he'd kill to know what makes him laugh. *Really* laugh.

(Stupid jokes passed back and forth over comms in lieu of honesty. You made do under observation.

There's no-one out here but them, now.)

*Geneva convention's remarkably silent on the subject of buildings*, Ghost says. Testing the church door with hand, then foot; it looks like it'd cave in with a few swift kicks, but the sound would echo down into the valley, and in any case the whiff of Catholicism about Mr. Riley is sufficient such that this fine Mexican architecture is likely safe from his size 12's. For now, anyway.

He finds a gap in the frame, slides in the knife. Deft work. Delicate. The latch pops with a dull cracking sound, a puff of dust. He holds up a hand. Gestures for Soap to stand by. Like it's an enemy stronghold,

and not a shoebox of a church in the remote Guanajuato hills. Soap sways on his feet as Ghost sidles in, rifle on standby. The kind of man who could look into the eyes of a child and see danger; who could behold a field of flowers and would instinctively sweep it for hostiles. Maybe that's why Soap had been shot, and he hadn't.

*All clear, Ghost says.*

(No shit, Soap thinks)

*Roger that.* He follows on shaky legs. The interior of the church is spartan, humble. Double row of stark wooden pews. Whitewashed walls. A scattering of religious paraphernalia, eerie in shadow. He slumps into a pew, finding small relief in repose. Watches Ghost rummage around the altar, sweeping aside unlit candles, a worn old bible.

*What're you looking for?*

*First aid kit.*

*In a church?*

Ghost gazes at him from across the altar. *What if some old dear slips and cracks her head during Mass?* He tuts. *Health and safety, Johnny.* Ducking momentarily beneath the altar, like he's taking cover. Soap hears the sound of objects being pushed around. The clink of glass. *Well would you look at that.* Unearthing a half-bottle of tequila from beneath the altar. He raises it, triumphant. *God's own disinfectant. Fancy a snifter?*

Soap tilts his head. *Aye. Gis a sip.*

*What kind of twat sips tequila.* Sitting beside him on the pew. *Come on,* he says, holding out the bottle. *Get it down you.*

*Is that medically advisable, Lt?*

*Is it fuck,* Ghost smirks. *Never was much of a doctor. But when the Lord provides...*

Soap takes a gulp. Grimaces at the acidity. Bathtub pish, this; no wonder the priest keeps it hidden. *Christ,* he mutters, passing it back



to Ghost. *I've had White Lightning tasted better than this.*

*That bad, eh?* He tugs his mask up over his chin. Soap commits the shape of his mouth to memory. He's seen it before, a few times, and always brief, but it hits different now, somehow. The way his lips meet the mouth of the bottle. The edge of his teeth, sharp and crooked. He lifts his chin, takes a long swallow. The prickle of blonde stubble along the contour of his jaw, and Soap is mesmerised by the mundanity of it, the improbable mystery of his skin.

*Tastes alright to me,* Ghost says, tugging the mask back down. *All them deep fried mars bars have killed your tastebuds.*

He rolls his eyes. The tequila burns in his stomach, in his blood. His vision shimmers. Swimmy with depletion. *With respect, sir, you're English. You wouldn't know good food if it bit you on the arse.*

He huffs, approximating laughter. *Still got the energy to be a cheeky cunt, have we? Good.* Unhooking his knife from his belt. He pries up the bloodstiff hem of Soap's sleeve with an experimental forefinger. *This'll sting a bit,* he says, a little softer now, and there's something unnerving about it. The tentative way he lingers over the wound. Like the notion of hurting him is suddenly intolerable to this man, who visits pain on others like he was built for the purpose.

*I can manage.*

*Course you can.* Gruff approval. Safer. More familiar. Soap can work with gruff. Ghost slides the tip of the knife into the gap between skin and sleeve. Peeling away old blood. A dusting of it drifts onto the pew beneath. Paring away the fabric, serrated edge through cotton, methodical, until all that's left is the wound, and the scrap of shirt still fused with it. His eyes meet Soap's. A moment's held breath. Soap nods. The pain, when it comes, is blinding. White heat blooms behind Soap's squeezed-shut eyelids.

*Good lad,* Ghost murmurs.

Soap exhales, long and harsh. Something warm trickles down his arm. Sharp copper stink, and something else. Sweet, like rot. Men sprawled in the back of a truck, fresh from the field; wounds packed with dirt, baked in the sun, the stench of fever sweat, of dying breath. Too far gone to do much more than hold their hands, mumble falteringly along with their prayers, and he ill-appointed to give their last rites, but christ, someone had to, didn't they? You can't let a man go into the grey alone like that.

(He's not there yet. Won't find himself there, with any luck. But if it comes to it. If it does...)

*Jesus, Soap.* A finger traces the margins of the wound, slick with pulp. Gentle. Like an apology. *What sort of shite have you been rolling in?*

He gives a soft laugh. Woozy. He's always been daft in delirium. *Got soft hands,* he mumbles, *for a big lad.*

*Piss off.*

*Is it bad?*

Ghost pauses for a moment. Soap cracks open an eye. Peers down at his arm, caged in callused fingers. Grime, and blood. Some fresh. Improbable tan for a Scotsman, and Ghost's skin an apt kind of pallor, smeared wet and crimson.

*Well you've not gone septic yet. But you will, if we fuck around much longer.* He holds Soap's arm firm. Plucks the tequila up off the pew. *What's the Scots word for cheers?* he asks.

*It's 'Cheers', Lt.*

*Ha fucking ha.* He upends the bottle without ceremony. Cheap liquor sluicing over ragged flesh, fragments of embedded dirt. Mingling with blood like something holy. Soap sucks in a breath; the sting is bright, glassy. Bearable, after everything. A residual burning gnawing at the margins of the wound. Droplets patter onto the church floor, loud in the silence. Blood pooling on terracotta. Someone will find this in the morning, and they will wonder what transpired here, in this sacred place. Or maybe they won't. No miracle to be observed here. Only two stupid gringos bleeding in the house of God.

The sound of tearing fabric pulls him from the soup of his own feverish thought. He turns. Ghost has a swathe of white linen in his hands, is ripping it methodically into strips with the edge of his knife. *Where'd you get that?*

*Spare altar cloth.* He soaks a wad with the remaining tequila. Grips Soap's bicep gently. *Got no gauze. This'll do.*

*For what?*

Ghost stares at him. *Patching you up.*

Soap blinks. *You're shitting me.*

*Good Catholic boy, are you Johnny? Always struck me as a proddy.*

He winces as Ghost patches the wound. Damp altar cloth wadded firm. Winding dry strips around, securing it in place. The son of God stares balefully down at them from his cross, immaculate in white plaster. He can't figure out what stings worse: the strangled bullet wound, or being taken for a fucking orangeman. *Neither, really*, he says. *When I was a wean-*

*Speak English.*

Soap snorts. *When I was a child, sir*, he says, rolling his eyes, *we went to church for funerals and weddings and that was about it.*

*Lucky you.* He ties deft knots with those big hands, excruciating in his care. Soap doesn't know why it surprises him. It's not like Ghost has ever been slapdash. But this capacity for gentleness. He hadn't predicted it. A man like him, bristling and gruff. Barking orders down the comms. Sharp even in softness, but there is softness. Like flowers in concrete. You think you know a man, and then he touches you like you're made of china, and you realise you know sweet fuck all.

*( Graves tried to kill us, he'd said. Would stand to reason if you were a little off.*

Coming from him, it might as well have been a hug.)

*No exit wound*, Ghost says, indicating the bloodied cloth with a sage nod. *Backstabbing yee-ha cunt couldn't even shoot you clean.*

*Don't suppose that was his priority.*

*Suppose not.* He sits back, appraising his own handiwork with a critical eye. Wiping bloody hands on scraps of altar cloth, casual in his blasphemy. *It'll hold for now*, he says. A verbal shrug. His eyes meet

Soap's. Black and depthless in the dark. *You're looking a bit pale. Not gonna hit the deck, are you?*

*Just a bit woozy, he says. It'll pass.*

The arm around his waist is a little too brusque to be comforting, but it does the trick. He sways into Ghost, landing firm against him; head slant on the brick wall of his shoulder, the world's most uncomfortable pillow, but he's not one to complain, is Soap, will take whatever he's given, and the heaviness of his own depleted limbs feels like the more pressing issue right now.

*Can't have you cracking your head on the floor,* Ghost says, by way of reason. His voice rumbles through Soap like a passing train. Vibrating into the very bones of him. *No first aid kit, after all.*

Soap gives a weak little laugh. *Appreciate it, Lt.*

*We've got about three hours til dawn. Reckon it'll take us another hour on foot. Longer if we take it slow.* And we should, he doesn't add, considerate of Soap's feelings; wouldn't do for him to feel like a burden, though he'd never have taken it as such. The crook of Ghost's elbow sits tight in the curve of Soap's waist. All rigid tension, rebar posture. This is not a comfortable situation for him.

There's a lot he doesn't know about Ghost. He has a semblance of knowing, a serviceable structure cobbled together from observation, and things he's let slip, off-guard; things Price has told him, and things he's extrapolated. Educated guesswork. And so it's with no authority whatsoever that he supposes Ghost was raised entrenched in the spirit of glorious British masculinity, in which physical affection is reserved strictly for a) the woman you are fucking, whilst you are fucking her or b) your mother, but only up until the age of seven; any deviation from the norm indicates some kind of latent and/or virulent homosexuality, i.e. *what are you, a fucking poofter?* Soap himself is not unfamiliar with the brand; he'd been steeped in it himself, for a time, though his intrinsic happy-go-lucky nature had proven talismanic against the worst of it. As had discovering, later on, that he was in fact a *fucking poofter* .

( *Whimsical cunt, ain't ya?* Ghost had assessed, a few days after meeting him.

He'd taken it as a compliment.)

*All right, Soap says. So what are your orders?*

*Half hour's rest. Forty minutes, tops.*

*All puffed out are you, sir?*

Wry laughter, like distant thunder in the cavern of his chest. *Sod off.*

He's not about to look a gift horse in the mouth. Ghost might be about as comfortable as a bed of nails, but Soap's always been a positive sort of soul. The swell of a firm pectoral is as good a pillow as any. He closes his eyes. Breathes in his scent.

(unintentionally. honest, guv)

There's something of a wet dog about him. Not unpleasant. Damp clothes drying over skin. Undercurrent of sweat, musky and sharp, like an animal. Gym changing room smells. And he's never been a praying sort of man, but in this moment he thanks God and all His angels that he's too exhausted to pop a hard-on.

*Wish they had fuckin cushions,* he murmurs, against Ghost's chest. *Arse is going numb*

Ghost snorts. *Any other demands, your highness? Tunnock's teacake? Nice cup of tea? Handjob?*

He's being glib, but christ alive. He'll have to send Graves a fucking fruit basket as thanks for the fulminating infection, because under any other circumstances that single word delivered in that low, rumbling monotone would've gone straight to his dick. It still does, a little.

*While I'm bleeding out?* Soap says, impressed at his own manufactured blitheness. *Not very health and safety of you*

He feels Ghost shrug. *Least you'd die happy.*

*Not gonna fuckin die, Lt.*

*All right. We'll keep that one in reserve, then.* He gives Soap a reassuring pat on the hip. *Get some kip, will you? Gonna need you mobile in a few.*

*Roger that,* he says, and then, in a near-instant, he's gone.

#

He wakes without prompting this time. Might have been asleep for two minutes, for all Ghost has moved; stoic as a rock in the desert, terrible in his stillness, and Soap knows on some instinctive level that this is entirely out of respect for his comfort, his recovery. For him.

(Reason is a cold bucket of water he tosses over himself. It's practicality, that's all. Ghost needs him on his feet. He needs him alert. If that means being his pillow for an hour, then so be it.)

*How you feeling?* Ghost asks, as he stirs.

*Like I've been on the Bucky all fucking night,* he says, grimacing. His arm feels stiff, heavy; he flexes his fingers, finds them responsive. It's as good as he can hope for right now.

*That good, eh?*

*I'll keep,* Soap says. Reluctant to peel himself from Ghost's warmth, uncomfortable as he is; a glowering Moai statue festooned with intrusive hardware, buckles and zips and the various accoutrements of their trade. Ghost, for his part, is in no hurry to displace him, though he'd previously extolled the need for haste, and Soap is no expert at navigating by the skies, but he's certain that the first thin filaments of predawn are already worrying at the distant horizon. More than forty minutes, then.

He looks up. Mother Mary gazes down at them, in all her pallid melancholy. His sleep-hazy eyes travel across the walls, taking in shabby iconography, an almost pagan display of objects handcarved, handpainted, crafted by the faithful, in reverent devotion. There, beside the altar, hammered out of old tin: a blazing heart encased in

savage thorns, painted the deep burgundy of fresh offal. No genteel British church, this. His local vicar would probably shit his cassock.

*Here*, Soap says, indicating the milagro with a nod. *How's that for tattoo inspo?*

He feels Ghost stiffen abruptly. Belatedly, he realises the taboo he's broken. Acknowledgement of the flesh. They've all seen it, though they pretend not to, disregard the reality of his bare skin, out of politeness or reverence or some secret third thing; nobody really knows, it's just what they do. And the mask stays on, always; in the showers after training, when the broad plain of Ghost's back manifests in brief, crossing over to the privacy of the stalls. Soap is only faintly ashamed to admit he's committed it all to memory. Stark blackwork, grey shadow; cacophonous in their varying quality, fuzzy older pieces half-subsumed by newer, crisper lines. Coverups performed with unlikely grace. The imagery is as subtle as Ghost himself: rictus-grinning skulls, smirking bombs engulfed in grey flame. A faceless squaddie with a rifle, ghostly in anonymity. Dog tags engraved with names he can't read, has never been close enough to comprehend. A fucking mess, all told, but Soap is not immune to the brutalist charm of it all, nor the thick-corded muscle rippling beneath.

He half expects Ghost to rebuke him. Change the subject at best, abrupt in his rejection. Their camaraderie has limits; the deeply personal is not Soap's gift, not yet. Perhaps not ever. But he just grunts, unimpressed by Soap's suggestion. *I'm done with all of that*, he says, offhanded. *Was a good idea at the time. But you grow, innit.* Unmoving, still. Soap's weight balanced against his broad ribs. Arm loose at the curve of his waist. *You change.*

*Do they mean anything, then?*

He's pushing. He knows he is. Ghost could tell him to piss off. He'll accept it with grace, if he does. But Soap has his favour, in this moment. Sympathy for the wounded. Trading vulnerabilities, in the way soldiers do, because Soap is attuned to notions of *empathy* and *emotional intimacy*, inasmuch as any squaddie can truly be, and that's how he knows he's an oddity in this world, where a man on his deathbed may cry for his mother, and the man beside him looks away in secondhand shame; but there's been blood spilt between them tonight, and what's a few more drops between comrades...?

*They're all bollocks, mostly.* He gets up. Slow, so as to give Soap time to adjust. It's a pulling away, but not a severing. Eyes trained on

something in the middle distance. Some spectre only he can see. The past, in all its ugliness, in all its beauty. *The shit ones. Got 'em when I was young.* He shakes his head. *Proper edgy little twat back then.*

Soap gives a faint smile, charmed at his bluntness. He doesn't interrupt. Sits still in his pew, feeling Ghost's warmth leach slowly from his skin into the stagnant air. He watches as Ghost turns toward the altar, as though reassured by its emptiness. Giving confession directly to God. Just like Ghost, he thinks, to cut out the holy middleman.

*My brother fixed 'em. As best he could, anyway. Never fucking asked him to, but. Brothers, innit.* He huffs, half-indignant. *Said 'I ain't fuckin leaving the house with you covered in that shite'. Insult to his profession. So I let him have at it. All the good ones. The coverups. That's his work.*

(Soap isn't convinced any of them qualify as 'good'. The ink itself, perhaps. The designs...well. He doesn't judge Ghost's erstwhile brother for it. He'd obviously done his best with the tools at his disposal.

His mam always said you couldn't polish a turd.)

*After he died,* Ghost continues, conversational, as though he's recounting the contents of his shopping list, *I said that was it. Cos if I was to go out and get a load more shite, then who's around to pull me up on it? He'd spin in his bloody grave. Couldn't do that to him.*

Guilt curdles in Soap's gut like something fatal. *I, uh. I'm sorry for your loss,* he says. It feels inadequate. So vague as to be meaningless. But Ghost just shrugs. Gazes up at Mother Mary, implacable in her sadness, as though she's seen every last tragedy in the world.

*It's old history, Johnny,* he says, with calm finality.

And there, Soap understands, the matter must rest. He's excised a piece of Ghost's flesh, beheld it in the palm of his hand, and now he must throw it away, pretend he doesn't feel the ragged margins of it against his skin, the imprint left behind, indelible in his knowing. Soap gets up. Slowly, aware of the static buzzing in his brain,



threatening to engulf. But he stands, and then he takes a step, and another. His body aches, and his arm screams bloody murder, and they'll have to hook him up to something potent when he's within spitting distance of medical care, but for now he'll have to coast on an hour's sleep and half a bottle of bathtub tequila.

Anyway, Ghost adds. Turning to face him at last. Something strange in the gleam of his eyes. The set of his brow, soft, somehow, even with all the greasepaint, the stark white sclera. *Big burning heart? Feels more like your kind of thing.*

He blinks. Uncomprehending. *Sir?*

Ghost snorts. His gaze shutters once more, but it's enough, for now; to know there *is* something behind it all, something soft and bloody and pulsing, and with enough patience, perhaps, enough coaxing and circling, maybe Soap might get to taste it someday.

*That's quite enough R&R for you,* Ghost says, recovering his brusqueness. Strolling toward the church doors with purpose; easing them open, and it's raining again, the scent of petrichor rising from the dry earth. *Still a way to go,* he says, staring out into the damp gloom. *You think you can manage?*

Somewhere in the distance, the sun is struggling towards the horizon. Slow, steady. He can do that, he thinks, heading towards the door. One step at a time. *Yeah,* Soap says, as the rain falls heavy to the earth, like stones thrown without care from the church roof. Like bullets on tin. *Yeah. I'll be fine.*

## End Notes

- my unending thanks to [Val](#) for being an absolute legend, supporting and cheerleading me at every step in writing this, I truly couldn't have done it without you <3 pls go and gaze upon Val's beautiful art it will change your life (it changed mine, I'm writing CoD fanfic after all)
- Ghost's bruv fixing his tattoos is entirely Silvi's superb headcanon, I am simply channeling her genius
- I realise the Brit slang is almost incomprehensible in places but that is the authentic experience, it's rare I get to write characters with my very own regional accent and slang so god bless Ghost for being the most inexplicably cockney mancanian in any media ever
- I had to shoehorn a tiny Graves reference in here somewhere unfortunately he is a babygirl (derogatory) to me

### GLOSSARY OF BRITISH TERMS:

Shanks' pony: on foot, walking

Bovver boots: heavy boots, sturdy in design, usually associated with football hooligans

Craigend: neighbourhood in Glasgow. Lots of council estates

Bolt ya rocket: Scots slang, roughly equivalent to 'piss off'

Snifter: small quantity of alcohol

Pish: Scots slang. 'piss'

White Lightning: cider in a can. chronic stuff.

Proddy: protestant

Orangeman: protestant, usually British unionist

Poofter: British slur for gay man

Tunnock's teacake: delightful chocolate/marshmallow snack

Bucky: Buckfast, Scottish tonic wine, nasty nasty shite

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